

Transcriber: Danielle Sayre

Transcription Date: May 4, 2018

Name of Narrator: Brande Bennett

Interviewer: Danielle Sayre recorded this interview with the permission of Brande Bennett for the research project "Georgia's Fishing Traditions & Fishing Futures". Primary Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, Georgia Southern University.

Others Present: Angelique Jennings

Date of Interview: March 23, 2018

Place: Georgia Sea Grant Facility in Brunswick, Georgia

Duration of Interview: Forty-Three Minutes and Nine Seconds

Repository for the Recording: The recording has been uploaded to the website, Voices from the Fisheries ([www.voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/](http://www.voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/))

Context for Interview: The two interviewers are undergraduate student researchers at Georgia Southern University who have come to the Georgia Sea Grant location in Brunswick to meet and interview the narrator for the first time.

General Description of Contents: The interview begins with a verbal informed consent and questions about the narrator's introduction into shrimping. The narrator discusses that she is a female shrimper that has worked with her father on his vessel, occasionally working with her uncle. She has worked several jobs in the off season as a shrimper and now works in the payroll and management side of her father's business versus the position of a striker on his vessel. She discusses how her children were raised on a shrimp boat much the same way she was and that her son has taken an interest to it and now works with her father. The narrator also discusses challenges working on a shrimp vessel as well as the unique challenges to be the only woman on a shrimp boat. The interview concludes with the desire for greater community involvement and understanding of shrimping history.

Danielle Sayre: Alright, my name is Danielle and I'm a student at Georgia southern university. I'm here with Brandy Bennett conducting an oral history interview as part of a project fishing traditions and fishing futures, oral histories of commercial fishing in Georgia. I've already received informed consent and permission to record from Brande, but could you please confirm that out loud?

Brande Bennett: Yes. I give permission to record.

Danielle Sayre: Thank you. Okay. I've got a few questions to get us started. The first dean, can you tell me where and when you grew up and what initiated your career in fishing?

Brande Bennett: Um, I grew up here in Brunswick, Georgia, and my father come from fishing. So uh, he raised me on the deck of the boat with him.

DS: So, um, he took you out pretty often as a child?

BB: Yes ma'am. Every weekend, every summer, every holiday I spent on the deck of that boat.

DS: When was your first paid job?

BB: With shrimpin'?

DS: Yeah.

BB: We got paid when we was children. We get paid from the crabs and the fish and stuff.

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DS: When did you feel like this would be your career?

BB: I don't know. I guess because I was raised in it. So. And um, um, we come from a long line of shrimpers so and I enjoy it.

DS: Okay. Um, when, when did you stop fishing with your father?

BB: A couple of years back because I got [inaudible]. It's hereditary. I can't be in the sun and I had to have laser surgery to him for like a year and a half. So I have to stay out of the sun now. So.

DS: So, what do you do now?

BB: I clean houses on the island.

DS: Yeah.

BB: So I still get to see the beach every day. I usually stop and get out before I go to work.

DS: Do you miss it?

BB: Yes, I miss it very much. Tell him I miss watching that sun come out of the ocean and that salty smell and taste that salt on your lips. There's nothing like it.

DS: Yeah. Um, so you said you stopped a couple of years back. How many years had you been working?

BB: Yeah, I'm trying to think. At least 35 years. We have a stool on my daddy's boat that I used to drive it when I was five and both of my children use the same stool to drop it when they was kids.

DS: And did you always work on just his boat or other boats?

BB: I worked with my uncle sometimes but mainly with my father.

DS: Um, did you ever encounter any challenges with your job or your profession or working on a shrimp boat?

BB: Yeah, sometimes with me being a girl there's not too many women you know that do it and then being a young girl and being around all them men and everything. So. But um, sometimes I don't know about challenging, sometimes scary moments, you know, being out there and stuff.

DS: What do you mean, scary moments?

BB: One time we caught a big ol' sting ray that was bigger than the boat and it was pullin' it sideways and stuff and finally it just ripped the net and got out. And then I've watched boats sink and go down.

DS: Oh really, from storms?

BB: Yea, or just like and knock a hole in the boat or something. And then, you know, the coast guards can't always make it there on time. So yeah. And to me that was kind of horrible to watch.

DS: Yeah. Um, so now that you're not fishing or shrimping, sorry. Um, do you think that there's still a future generation that's going to come up and keep the tradition going of fishing and shrimping.

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BB: I worry about that. They call them green horns, people that's never done it because I tell them, you know, they need to train because there's not that many that still do it and there's not the boats that there was in which there's not the big fish or crabs or anything like that. So, I wonder if it ever is going to come to an end.

DS: And um, the community that you grew up, was that a big part of it? Shrimping?

BB: Yes. Uh, I think that's why a lot of people come here to visit is to see the shrimp boats, you know, a lot of the yacht people down there and everything wants to us all gone. But that's the history of Brunswick, Georgia to me, is that people come here to see the shrimp boats and everything, and to eat the shrimp. Not pond shrimp or raised shrimp.

DS: Do you have any good stories about shrimping? Like your favorite one?

BB: Mm. I don't know. One time me and my daddy caught a golf cart up off the St. Simons Beach. That was a job 'cause it was just me and him trying to get it up so...

DS: So, does your dad still work the boat or...?

BB: Yes. He has two boats. I still help him. I do the payroll and manage it and everything and I'm always down there.

DS: So, he has two boats? Do they both go out frequently?

BB: Yes ma'am. My son runs one of them. He's in there.

DS: Do they have pretty large crews or how do... [overlap]

BB: Usually two to three. But it's hard to find people that want to work. They'll work for like a week or two or so. And then um, you have your slow times. I'd say you take the bad with the good, but not everyone wants to say then they'll want to quit. And I'm, like I say sometimes you make real good paychecks and sometimes you don't make paychecks for a couple of weeks, but I'd take it as, that's what you take with it, you know.

DS: I don't know a lot about it so I'm just a little curious. Uh, when you start to learn the process of shrimping, what's some of the first things that you learn and how does it progress?

BB: Um, You learn how to work the ropes and stuff and um, your nets, how to run your ticker chains and stuff, your floats, all that to how you catch because different times and different seasons you use floats and sometimes you don't. And then it depends on where you drag at too, you know, some places are real muddier than others and some are not. And then sometimes we catch a lot of jelly balls, you know, and stuff like that. So sometimes you don't get to drag that long, you have to go ahead and take up. So...

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DS: Do you have a favorite spot in the area that you'd like to shrimp at?

BB: Yes, St. Simons sound when it opens up in October. We make really good on low water, but it's not like it used to be, I mean, usually that's when we really did make real good money, but the last several years it's not been.

DS: Is there any significant changes that you've seen?

00:07:22

BB: Uh, with the two last hurricanes. Is that what we had? I can't remember if it's tornadoes or hurricanes. Um, and like after September when that one hit, um, we hadn't made any money. You know, just saw a little bit, but it put a real big hurtin' on us the last two storms in the last two years.

DS: How do you see the fishing community progressing in the future?

BB: I don't see it. Um, it's less and less every year. And now we're down to one dock. They're supposed to be fixin' the other one. But like I say, you could see old pictures and there's just...looks like hundreds of shrimp boats. But now like I said, there's only like a handful.

DS: So your dad, how long, how long has he been a fishermen?

BB: He has since he's been a kid too.

DS: Yeah? Did his grandfather do it as well?

BB: Mmhm. And his daddy did. And then his grandfather did too. Yeah. So that's why I say I come from a long line of them.

DS: Yeah. Um, and for people who don't live on the coast, maybe live a little bit more inland, who don't experience shrimping very often, what do you think is most important thing that they learn, um, about shrimping? Like what? What's the big takeaway that they can...take from shrimping?

BB: Well I consider it's a history, you know, that has come from generations and generations of families and um, it seems like because of so many that do drugs and drink that think we're different types of people, but not all of us is like that. And, some wanting to get rid of us and um, I don't know a lot of people love shrimp, you know, and there's, to me there's a total difference between a pond shrimp or whatever, or a fresh shrimp. I won't even eat a frozen shrimp. You know, so once we're gone they're going to miss.

00:09:44

DS: What are the most rewarding parts of your career as a shrimper?

BB: Hmm...I think I'm seeing things in the ocean and learning different creatures and stuff like that. 'Cause I tell him in the woods you kind of know what, but ocean you always catch something that you'd never seen his so it's a mystery to me and the ocean is.

DS: Have you ever caught anything interesting?

BB: Mainly sharks, you know, like really big, huge ones. We've caught a 20 foot hammerhead before and then um, the sea snakes I found kind of a little interesting. Um, we always played with all that we'd catch and you can almost see anything at the ocean.

DS: I'm just a little curious. So when you went shrimping, what was like your daily routine? Like when did you start and finish? How long do you usually start?

BB: Usually start around three or four o'clock in the morning, and leave out when you let everything out and uh, get ready and then head out to the channel or wherever you're gonna to fish at and put overboard. Then you start cleaning the boat and making sure everything's ready. So when you take up, sometimes it was a little boring because sometimes you have a little time in between and then sometimes you don't get no time. You know time, by time you get that clean, you're dumping again or you're dumping before you got that clean.

DS: And how long did you work day usually last?

BB: Sometimes you'd pull a couple of hours. It depends on if you tore up and lost some of your rig in or something. Some days, sixteen, seventeen hours a day. It was rough being a single mom and trying to raise two kids.

DS: Did you try to do that while you-?

BB: I did. Mmhm. Yeah.

DS: How often did you work?

BB: Seven days a week. Sometimes. I was my daddy's only striker at times, and then we had someone else, I was always the head striker so...

DS: What um, I'm sorry I'm not familiar, what's the position of the striker. What do they do?

BB: We cleaned the deck and pickup and head this shrimp and ice the shrimp and everything down, but I always drove the boat and stuff too.

DS: So, both your kids, they get to go on the boat as well?

BB: My daughter didn't really like it after she got a certain age and started school, but I raised both of them on there until they started school and then she just kind of stayed at home with my granny and kind of refused to go.

DS: Yeah. When you were a kid, did other kids also go to boats with their parents?

BB: Some. Um, some of the kids I went to school would, would come with us 'cause they was very fascinated with it.

DS: Was it like, were there a lot of fishing families?

BB: Yes. Yes, there was. And we was all really tight, you know, like a community.

DS: Oh really? Like...

BB: We kinda all grew up together, you know what I'm saying? When working on the boats, we'd all play out there together and stuff. The kids would. While the parents working on the boats.

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BB: Now I did get in trouble one time for not having my boots on, stuck a catfish and in my foot. So he made me go put my boots on and it was raining. So then I come back and I slipped and found stuck one in my hand and in my tush, and they had to pull it out. That was not fun.

DS: Who pulled it out?

BB: My uncle. I was like, see what's the point in having boots?

DS: So, wearing boots is something that you kind of always have to do?

BB: Yeah. Yeah, 'cause sometimes when you catch them little baby Catfish, we call them Georgia State patrol's, that's because they will slow you down from picking.

DS: Yeah.

BB: Yeah. Make the hands hurt...sore.

DS: So...I'm not familiar, but the cat fish, does it have like prongs?

BB: Yeah, on the sides. Mmhm.

DS: I noticed that you said that fishing has traumatically changed over the years. Was there a point where you felt like it was significant? Like it really had took a turn or really had changed?

BB: Yeah, um...I'm trying to think how long ago that was. [Inaudible] was cut off. But it was like...I wish I could remember when. But um...the shrimp wasn't quite as bad, which we have the black gill. And um...they say that makes a total difference in it. And um...I'm trying to remember though with the crabs and fish, 'cause it was like they just kind of depleted. You know, sometimes we're lucky if we get a half of basket of fish all day or all week. Whenever we used to have deck loads of crabs, I mean, we made real good money, me and my brother did, off the crabs and stuff.

00:16:47

AJ: Um, I wanted to know a little bit more about how you and your father worked together over all these years. Did you have any sort of sometimes disagreements?

BB: I have quit and made him take me to the dock, go get in the bed and say I quit. Take me to the dock. And so yeah, because he raised me to be very headstrong, but then also he didn't sometimes like it, you know, so sometimes we'd butt heads, but where we're really close, you know, we discuss anything. I mean um, so it kind of made us stronger and then sometimes I didn't like him because he was harder on me than he was the men. But I don't think I would be the woman that I am today if it wasn't for him being like he was with me. So.

AJ: Hmm. And do you think your upbringing also, I'm not just him teaching you to be headstrong, but you working on the boat for so long helped to form your upbringing as well?

BB: Yeah. So tell me, you know, the value of a dollar and that, you know, we have to work to survive in this world that everything's not handed to us. And I raised my kids the same way. So. And that it does, I think, make a difference. You can spoil a child with love, but if you spoil them with material things, I think you hurt them. Our job is to teach them how to take care of their self, not give them everything and then throw them out into the real world and think they're supposed to take care of their selves.

AJ: What do you think about the efforts being made by sea grant and by other organizations who are trying to help learn and educate more people about fisherman and you know, commercial fishing.

BB: I think it's a good idea because they need to see that it is something that families has done for years and years and um, I don't know. Lost, sorry, train of thought. But they need to be educated because it is something I think we need, you know what I'm saying. So

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DS: I have a question about something. Um, did you ever do like long trips? Like a couple of days?

BB: Whenever before I had my kids, I would go out for two and three weeks at a time because when you come in and step on the dock, take at least a day, day and a half that she didn't feel like he was a doin' like this. So you learned to play a lot of cards because back then we didn't really have tvs on the boat that much. So you lagged and played quarters and cards and, and then sometimes she got really bored. Done a lot of colorin'.

DS: And how many other people were on the boat with you?

BB: Usually two to three.

DS: Where you, you're the only female?

BB: Yes. The only girl.

DS: Was that hard?

BB: Yeah, it was because sometimes you didn't have no personal private space and then sometimes they didn't have bathrooms on the boats.

DS: So where did you guys typically stay around here or did you go along the coast?

BB: Before my father had me he went down to Florida and all that. But then here we just stayed here after I come along. So I never went any past further than Georgia.

DS: Um, so life on the boat, did you, um, you spent that mostly with your dad? So, did you, um, you were so young, did you develop relationships with other fishermen?

BB: Yes, they are, you know, they tease me now, you know, and they call me boss lady now, but I know all of them and I know a lot of some from South Carolina and North Carolina and my preacher at my church teases me, he says I'm bad and not too long ago when he done insurance, he, um, he said, I know a lot of men talk real highly of you. And he named them all. And I said you want to know the bad thing is he said, 'what?' I said I don't know any of 'em. He said, well, they talk like they really know you. And I say I am well known, you know, because of me working with my father and shrimpin'. And he said, you are very highly respected. I said 'Hmm'.

DS: What do you think really earned that respect?

BB: Um, because the way I worked with my father and I've always took care of my father, you know, and took care of the boat and worked really hard. I've worked really hard and I say I take pride in anything I do, even when my house I work on. All my homeowner's love me to death but my daddy taught me when you do it, do it right the first time, you won't have to do it again, but take pride in anything that you do.

00:22:15

DS: And so, um, with your son, he's working on a boat right now too, right? Yeah. And Are you helping him? Guide him through that process as well? Or?



BB: I did because he worked on there with us and um, but now that I don't, my father does, he's been trying to get me to go with him, you know, and make trips, but it's kinda hard for me scheduled that cause I do vacation properties. So you never know when they're coming in and when they're not busy. Yeah. He misses mama and being out there sometimes for him. Yeah, because we get along really good. Um, he tells everybody I'm his best friend.

DS: Do you ever see yourself getting back out there?

BB: I kind of want to this year because I love this time of the year, the fall. There's no better than being out there that time of the year. Sometimes summertime's a little rough. You can't even find a cool breeze, you know what I'm saying? You're hunting for shade and they don't even feel cool in the shade.

DS: We understand that. So, do you, um, are you hoping that your son carries on the tradition?

BB: Yes. And it's hard for him because he sees the industry dying, you know, in a place is going to have a future in it. And um, so sometimes we butt heads about it because he thinks about going, but we need someone to run the boats. So, it's a hard decision.

DS: So, you say you guys butt heads, are you insisting that he do the career?

BB: You know, because he's still young and um, because he wants to go into the service and I'm not too gone ho. And um, he don't always see taking the bad with the good with the money, but in the off season I waitress built houses, do tile work, you sow, so I know how to make money in between. And like I say, he just sometimes see the dollar.

DS: Did you always have to work second, like other jobs in the off season?

BB: In the off season, yea.

DS: With him moving forward, do you feel like there's going to be an upturn in the fishing industry?

BB: I really don't know. I worry, you know, that it is because that's the only thing that my father's ever done. You know, I have always do other jobs, so I knew how to do something different because nothing's permanent.

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DS: What um, what is your favorite tradition on the shrimp boat?

BB: Mother's day. Well, I didn't have a mom so every Mother's Day, half the time it fall on his birthday or something and we always spend that together as a family. We'd decorate the boat and everything and do the blessing, the blessing of the fleet with the blessing of the fleet.

DS: What's the 'Blessing of the Fleet'?

BB: The catholic preacher gets out there on another boat and, and like say they have a contest who's decorated the best and everything and um, we are circle the boat and then go out by the bridge and throughout the reef and stuff. So it's kind of like a tradition.

00:29:33

DS: Yeah. And you don't have to ask or answer if you don't like to, but I'm not growing up with your mother. there was, that was difficult?

BB: Yeah, it was very difficult because I was saying my father raised me like a boy, so whenever I become a teenager girl it was kind of a little hard for me because I was so tomboyish and there was no nieces or granddaughters. I was the only girl.

DS: Was it difficult navigating that on a shrimp boat?

BB: Yes. Especially when that came up and I hadn't the slightest clue and that's where I started. Yeah, yeah.

DS: On a shrimp boat?

BB: Yes. And I didn't have anything because I didn't know anything about it, you know, I just knew I was hurting and then my daddy told me and he said 'we need to go in'. and he went in the store and bought them to. Yes. He's always went in the store and bought them for me. Yes. And not be ashamed for them, he said 'they're not for me'.

BB: Well now he doesn't say anything now, but even when I was a teenager and in my twenties and in a bathing suit, when we come up to the dock I had to put my shirt on when he'd come back there today "Put shirt on, were almost at dock".

DS: So, he was pretty protective?

BB: Yes.

DS: Was he productive while you are staying on the boat too?

BB: Yes. Oh yes. He always made me be the head of everybody that was on there and then they had to do, as I say, I am respect me.

DS: Did you ever notice him, like, I don't know, maybe like hiring practices, like for who he allowed on the boat or not?

BB: No, he pretty much would ask me. They did tell me a story one time because like I say, they come in at a certain time of the year, South Carolina people in North Carolina and one of the guys I thought was kinda cute, but he was there and then next thing I know he was nowhere around and he was going back and well apparently he'd said something about me and he did not know that was my daddy and things were said no boy never come back around the dock.

BB: But I have had incidence and I don't let my daddy deal with them, I deal with them on my own, but some was kind of disrespectful to me, but most of them, majority of them respect me.

DS: Okay. Um, so do you see women in the field now shrimping or do you think that it's a possibility?

BB: It can be. Yeah, I think so. I mean it depends on them. It's a hard job. It's not easy. Some people would say it is. My ex would say it wasn't a hard job until he done it, you know? And then it was hard for him.

00:39:11

AJ: So how has it been for you working on the business side now as opposed to being a shrimper? What are the differences you see now that you've been on both sides?

BB: Oh, I like just being the boss, being 'here comes the boss lady', you know, in doing the payroll and everything and then going down there, you know, and seeing a mile because I miss it. So, it's like I'm famous or something and when I come down.

DS: So, our last question, it's just what are some positive and negative changes in fishery or a or community over your lifetime and how would you like to see the future of your community progress?

BB: I would like to see more shrimp boats come back, you know, and still see shrimping going on rather than disappear and go away. And then like with the community come out and support when we do the blessing and everything, I think it would help build up Glenn county.